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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 000436

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SUBJECT: ASHGABAT AMBASSADORS ON POLITICS, GROWING RUSSIAN  
INFLUENCE, AND TURKMENISTAN'S ENERGY OPTIONS

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Classified By: Classified by Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Jennifer L. Brush  
for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

#### SUMMARY

11. (C) Visiting Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Russia and Eurasia Dionisio de Leon, Charge, and embassy officers met with Ashgabat-based ambassadors on April 26-27 to solicit their impressions of the current political situation in Turkmenistan. Georgian Ambassador Alexy Petriashvili, Ukrainian Ambassador Viktor Mayko, UK Ambassador Peter Butcher, and Turkish Ambassador Hakki Akil gave their perspectives on Turkmenistan,s internal political situation, the increasing level of Russian influence in Turkmenistan, and the potential for alternative energy export routes.

12. (C) Although the ambassadors presented very different perspectives on the internal political situation in Turkmenistan -- reflecting the difficulty of teasing out rumor from fact and the opaque nature of the political system -- all agreed that Russia's influence was strong and probably increasing and that the prospects for alternative energy routes, including the Trans-Caspian Pipeline, were still open but contingent on negotiation between Turkmenistan and Russia. Ambassadors also discussed their views on prospects for future cooperation with Turkmenistan,s leadership. End Summary.

GEORGIAN AMBASSADOR: BERDIMUHAMMEDOV NOT CALLING THE SHOTS

13. (C) Georgian Ambassador Alexy Petriashvili believed that Berdimuhammedov was being controlled by a team of officials who were responsible for Berdimuhammedov's swift rise and who had the power to remove the president if he failed to satisfy

their expectations. Petriashvili said that Berdimuhammedov had absolutely no independent power base.

14. (C) The officials in control, Petriashvili suggested, fell into two groups: Niyazov's team of ethnic Russian advisers, including Viktor Khramov, Vladimir Umnov, and Aleksandr Jadan; and security ministers, namely Presidential Security Chief Akmurat Rejepov. Rejepov seemed very much "at home" in the presidential palace and very relaxed, and his connections from the Soviet KGB Academy were still active.

15. (C) Petriashvili said that Niyazov's family for the most part had stepped aside, but commented that former presidential son Myrat Niyazov was trying to become the "new opposition" to Berdimuhammedov's regime. Myrat had been trying to convince people that Berdimuhammedov and the siloviki (security forces) killed his father. According to Petriashvili, he attempted to demonstrate his connections to Russian President Putin and the Russian leadership by visiting Russia immediately after his father's death. Myrat was planning to visit the United States and to meet with officials in Washington to prove his sway to Turkmenistan's new leadership, which for its part was trying to push Myrat out of town as quietly as possible. Myrat was now living in the dilapidated Nebetci Hotel, which Petriashvili described as "a place I'd put my accountant."

#### UKRAINIAN, BRITISH, AND TURKISH AMBASSADORS: BERDIMUHAMMEDOV CONSOLIDATING POWER

16. (C) Ukrainian Ambassador Viktor Mayko, UK Ambassador Peter Butcher, and Turkish Ambassador Hakki Akil all believed that Berdimuhammedov was solidifying his power base. Mayko dismissed the "puppet master" theory but said that Berdimuhammedov was very constrained in his decision making.

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Constraints on the president included his inexperience, lack of independent power, the population's mentality (quick moves were "impossible and dangerous") and Russian influence. Over the next year, Mayko predicted that Berdimuhammedov would increase his personal power to make himself more independent.

17. (C) Butcher said that Berdimuhammedov's firing of Minister of Internal Affairs Rahmonov was a sign that Berdimuhammedov was asserting his independence, and Mayko believed that this was the first of many changes to come in the power ministries. Mayko believed that Berdimuhammedov would replace the Minister of Defense, the Prosecutor General, and the Minister of National Security. He agreed that Khramov, Umnov, and Jadan were still in power, and said that Rejepov and National Security Chief Ashyrmuhammedov were definitely key players in the transitional period.

18. (C) Mayko noted the "newcomers" to the political scene: the new Head of the Presidential Administration Ishanguliyev and Myrat Yslamov (Note: Yslamov, a former head of the State Service for the Registration of Foreigners, and Deputy Chairman for the State Counternarcotics Commission under Ashyrmuhammedov, was demoted in November 2006, and appeared to have been reinstalled in government. End Note.), who was now responsible for logistics and procurement for the Ministry of Defense (Note: This was just the "top side" of his responsibilities, said Mayko, implying that his influence ran deeper. End Note.), as well as Berdimuhammedov's former deputy in the Ministry of Health Myradov, who now was responsible for oil and gas procurement ) and suggested that Berdimuhammedov was building his own inner circle.

19. (C) Akil alone believed that Rejepov was not a powerful player in Berdimuhammedov's administration. He said that Meredov was the strongest adviser to Berdimuhammedov, but that Meredov was noncommittal and deliberately kept a low profile.

ALL AGREE: THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING

¶10. (C) All ambassadors believed that Russian influence in Turkmenistan had increased since Niyazov's death and that Russia had greater leverage over Berdimuhammedov than it ever had over Niyazov.

¶11. (C) Russian leverage played primarily to the Turkmenistan president's fears that Russia could remove him from power. If Russia decided to remove Berdimuhammedov, Petriashvili said, they could. Letting Russia get involved, Mayko said, was part of the price Berdimuhammedov paid for political stability at home.

¶12. (C) Russia's specific goal, according to Akil, was to obtain solid guarantees from Turkmenistan on gas exports and to convert the framework agreement on natural gas to a commercial contract. (Note: Akil stated that, commercially speaking, there was no need for a long term contract because there was an existing pipeline; a contract in this case served mainly political purposes. End Note.) If Russia were to secure this type of contract from Turkmenistan, the message -- that all of Turkmenistan's gas belonged to Gazprom -- would be clear.

#### TURKMENISTAN FACING CONSTRAINTS ON GAS EXPORT OPTIONS

¶13. (C) All agreed that Turkmenistan's best commercial option was the Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP), but found it hard to imagine a day when Berdimuhammedov would stand up and announce that he had authorized construction of the pipeline,

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considering Russia's opposition to the route. Mayko said that he thought the TCP was still under consideration, but that he had doubts about Turkmenistan leadership's seriousness, and believed that they may only need it as leverage to get a better deal from Russia. (Note: Mayko said that Russia would pay a maximum of \$140 to \$150 for Turkmenistan's gas, and that Berdimuhammedov would almost certainly try to renegotiate the price of Turkmenistan's gas by autumn, despite the three year fixed price agreement with Russia. End Note.)

¶14. (C) Mayko, Butcher, and Akil agreed that the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (-India) pipeline proposals were effectively off the table because of the security situation in Afghanistan, and that none of the parties seemed energized on the issue. Akil said that although Turkmenistan continued to support the idea of exporting gas to China, because of the high cost of pipeline construction, China would only pay a low price for the gas, probably lower than Russia. (Note: Akil estimated that 6000 km of pipeline would be required to reach China's gas markets. End Note.)

#### NEXT STEPS FOR THE WEST: ACT AGGRESSIVELY, QUICKLY, AND BRING CONCRETE PLANS

¶15. (C) The ambassadors believed that the West must step up its efforts so as not to miss an opportunity for engagement with Turkmenistan's new leadership. All agreed that the West was not doing enough to send a serious signal to Berdimuhammedov.

¶16. (C) According to Mayko, Turkmenistan needed to see concrete offers, plans, and assistance to believe that the West was serious about engagement. He recommended that Western countries move more aggressively, rapidly and specifically, and said that, if that happened, Turkmenistan would be more responsive. The West should seize this moment of opportunity -- when Berdimuhammedov was still open to new ideas and possibilities -- to take advantage of the readiness for dialogue.

¶17. (C) Akil suggested that the timeframe for Western action was immediate because of Putin's upcoming April 13-14 visit to Ashgabat. He said that the West should send very high-level messages to Berdimuhammedov now if Western countries were serious about the strategic importance of the TCP; barring urgent intervention, he feared, Putin would ratchet up pressure on Berdimuhammedov to increase Turkmenistan's commitments to Gazprom.

#### COMMENT

¶18. (C) The lack of agreement by Ashgabat-based ambassadors on the dynamics of Turkmenistan's internal political situation reflects the continued opacity surrounding the country's leadership. Generally reliable interlocutors seem to have less clarity now on the dynamics of decision-making than they did during Niyazov's era. The ambassadors' disagreement as to who is calling the shots in Ashgabat reflects a situation in the capital where rumor -) originating at all levels -- is difficult to separate from fact.

¶19. (C) The apparent consensus that Russian influence was growing in Ashgabat was telling, and even more telling was the common belief that Berdimuhammedov is operating under the assumption -- right or wrong -- that Russia is in a position to unseat him or to undermine his political security. Combined with the shared belief that Russia rolled out the

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red carpet for Turkmenistan's new president while the West stood by, this painted a gloomy picture for the prospects of increased cooperation with Turkmenistan. The call for more concrete signals from the West was clear, and the ambassadors conveyed a sense of urgency, suggesting that the window of opportunity was not unending. End Comment.

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